

Thomas Hart Benton to Andrew Jackson, July 25, 1813, from Correspondence of Andrew Jackson. Edited by John Spencer Bassett.

THOMAS H. BENTON TO JACKSON.

Franklin, Tenn., July 25, 1813.

Sir, Your letter of the 19th. instant was delivered me this day. The following general statement is intended to cover the whole of your enquiries.

On my way to Washington city, 10th. May, I passed your house, at your request, and received from you, unsolicited, a letter of introduction to the Secretary of War, more honorable to me than my merits had deserved. That I was friendly to you at that time, and for more than a month afterwards, is evidenced by the fact, well known to you, that on monday the 14th. day of June, the day on which you superintended the shooting of my brother, I was in the war office in Washington city, exerting my very poor abilities according to your wishes on a subject which lay very near to your heart. If you want any other evidence of my disposition towards you at that time, you can get it by applying to the gentlemen in congress from this state.

On my return I heard of my brothers duel with Mr. Carroll and of your agency in that affair.¹ What I have since said on this subject may be reduced to three or four heads.

1 Oct. 4, 1824, General, then Governor, Carroll made the following statement in regard to Jackson's part in the Carroll-Benton duel, putting it in the form of a letter to Andrew J. Donelson:

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"Sir, Having been requested by Captain A. J. Donelson to make a statement of the conduct of General Andrew Jackson who acted as my friend in a duel between Mr. Jessee Benton and myself, which took place in June 1813, I submit the following, which, in every important point is strictly correct.

"I had been challenged by Littleton Johnston a young officer of the army, and for reasons which it is unnecessary to detail, I refused to meet him. Not satisfied with my refusal, he applied to Mr. Benton to act as his friend and be the bearer of a second challenge to me. With a knowledge of my having declined to meet Johnston, he came to Nashville, and delivered a second challenge from him (Johnston) to me, on receipt of which, I stated to Mr. Benton that I would give him an answer the next day. Mr. Benton having a knowledge of the circumstances of the affair between Johnston and myself, I thought it probable that he was disposed to make himself the principal. I therefore determined to inform him by note, that I would not fight Johnston, but that if he would volunteer in his behalf he should be accommodated with a meeting. I then went to General Jackson's and informed him of what had passed, and requested the favor of him to hand to Mr. Benton the note which I intended writing to him. The General stated that he could perceive no cause of quarrel between Mr. Benton and me; that he would come to Nashville on the following day for the purpose of bringing about an amicable adjustment of the affair, and accordingly he did come to town, and at my request, delivered to Mr. Benton [the] note which I had prepared before his arrival, and of which the following is a copy.

" Nashville June 11th. 1813

"Sir, I presume you are apprized, that I would not have any thing to do with Mr. Johnston in the way he requested, and your coming forward as his friend, after having this knowledge, makes it probable you have volunteered in his behalf. If so, you can explain to Genl. Jackson, your object and your wishes, and it will only rest with your self the line of conduct

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you intend to pursue hereafter as no communications from Johnston will be attended to by me.

"I am etc

" Wm. Carroll

"On delivering the note to Mr. Benton, General Jackson, as I was then informed, stated to him he was under no obligation to fight me; and advised him to consult with some experienced gentleman, who would doubtless give him the same advise. This he did do, as I was afterwards informed by a gentleman he consulted on the subject who gave to him the same opinion. However, after most of the day had elapsed, he handed to General Jackson a note in the following words.

" Nashville, 12th. June 1813

"Major Carroll

"Sir, I consider the note you sent me as dictated in the spirit of hostility, and moreover I consider your conduct with regard to Mr. Johnston as unjustifiable; I therefore deem it necessary to request that you will cause the necessary preparations to be made for a decisive settlement of the affair in which we are engaged. You will please to inform me as early as possible as I shall be in complete readiness by twelve O'clock to morrow. I have the honor to be etc

"Major Carroll " Jessee Benton

"He was informed by the General, that I would meet him; and it was agreed between them, that on the day next but one, at twelve O'clock, the friend of Mr. Benton and General Jackson should meet in Nashville, for the purpose of agreeing upon the rules which were to govern the parties in terminating the affair. The matter having progressed so far, I conceived it to be my duty to adopt such measures as would place me on equal grounds

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with my adversary, who was known to be a first rate marksman with a pistol; and, as I never had shot much, I concluded, that he would have no advantage if the distance was short, and therefore determined on ten feet. This determination I made known to General Jackson, who said, that having been challenged, I had the right of selecting the distance; but as I had equally the right of naming the time of meeting, I could in a few days learn to shoot well, and therefore he thought that there could be no great objection to the usual distance of thirty feet. Finding that I was disposed to adhere to the distance first selected, the General proposed that it should be increased at least to fifteen feet. After making an experiment by shooting a few times, I decided not to alter the distance I had at first chosen. I mention this circumstance, because General Jackson has been *incorrectly* charged, with advising the selection of a short distance with a view of making the combat a desperate one. At the time appointed, General Jackson and the friend of Mr. Benton met in Nashville, and rules and regulations for governing the parties in bringing the affair to a close, were drawn up and signed by them. And, altho I had an undoubted right to fix the time of meeting, yet, that was conceded by the courtesy of Genl. Jackson to Mr. Benton; and he did appoint for that purpose six Oclock the next morning. In further proof of the conceliating disposition of the General, he called on me twice, the same afternoon the rules were agreed to, (at the request of Mr. Benton and his friend as he informed me) to get me to consent to an ex[t]ension of the distance to which I would not agree. The next morning we met at the place appointed; and after our pistols were loaded, Mr. Benton and my self took our positions, ten feet from each other, standing back to back. After being asked if we were ready, and both answering in the affirmative, the word *fire* was given when we wheeled and fired. Mr. Benton was severely wounded, and myself slightly. At the time the word fire was given, and at the moment of wheeling, I observed, that Mr. Benton came round with great quickness to a very low squatting position. Such a manoeuvre being unexpected, I inquired of General Jackson, on leaving the ground, if it was correct or honorable. He replied that it was not; but, that he thought Mr. Benton was mortally wounded, and that it would be improper in us to say any thing about it; that if he lie died the disgrace of his conduct ought to die with him; and if he lived, the thorns and difficulties

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of life would be sufficiently numerous without the addition of those, which the publicity of the matter would certainly throw in his way.

“The foregoing statement contains all the material circumstances that I recollect at present. I will Just add, that throughout the whole affair, so far from General Jackson's attempting to excite a quarrel, his advise to me was of the most conceliating and forbearing character.

“Respectfully

1. That it was very poor business in a man of your age and standing to be conducting a duel about nothing between young men who had no harm against each, and that you would have done yourself more honor by advising them to reserve their courage for the public enemy.

2. That it was mean in you to draw a challange from my brother by carrying him a bullying note from Mr. C. dictated by your self, and which left him no alternative but a duel or disgrace.

3. That if you could not have prevented a duel you ought at least to have conducted it in the usual mode, and on terms equal to both parties.

4. That on the contrary you conducted it in a savage, unequal, unfair, and base manner. *Savage*: Because the young men were made to fight at ten feet distance, contrary to your own mode, to what is usual among gentlemen, and against the remonstrance of my brother. *Unequal*: Because the parties were made to wheel; an evolution which Mr. C. perfectly understood, but which my brother knew nothing about, and against which he earnestly objected. *Unfair*: Because you concealed the mode of fighting from my brother, put off the duel on a frivolous pretext from friday until monday; and in the mean time secretly practised Mr. C. to whirl and fire ten feet at a small saplin, until he could strike the centre of it at every shot. *Base*: Because you avowed yourself to be the friend of my brother while giving to his adversary all these advantages over him. In consequence

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of all which my brother was drawn into a duel against his wishes, and fought under circumstances wherein the chances, according to Mr. Carrols calculation, and your own must have been the same, were *twenty to one against him*.

I know your answer to all this: "Mr. C. would have it so." To which I reply: From your known influence over Mr. C. you might have managed the affair as you pleased; if not, you were at least a free man, and might have quit him if you did not approve of his course. To this effect, but in language much stronger, I have expressed myself when speaking of this matter.

You have been pleased to remind me of the services you have rendered me. I needed not the admonition. The same persons who carried you evil reports, might, if I am not mistaken, also have told you that I remembered the numerous acts of kindness you had done me, and regretted that I had not been able to make you any return. But because you had been my friend I could not sit, and smile assent upon your [cowardly] act, when I saw you doing what you could to break the heart of an aged and widowed mother, and hurrying into his grave a young man, a brother, whose life ought to have been preserved for the comfort of his family and the service of his country.

My subjects of complaint against you are limited to two: your conduct towards my brother; and the communication which it is believed that you made to the war office, and in which, as one of the Tennessee Volunteers, I was implicated in a charge of mutiny. If you did represent these troops as unwilling to fight under Wilkinson, without making an exception in my favor, you have done me a serious injury, and took a liberty with my name which the best of friends should not take with each other. For it was known to you that notwithstanding my prejudices against Gen. Wilkinson and the evil I had spoken of him, that yet I was satisfied of his right to command us; and as a military subaltern should render to him respect and obedience. That this point might be cleared up between us, I addressed you a note on the day after my arrival from Washington city: a note which you have not condescended to answer, or to notice in any shape.

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The balance of your interrogatories may be quickly answered: I have not threatened to tell you my sentiments, except in the event of your 23 calling upon me. I have not threatened to make any publication against you, except in the case of my brother, and that idea I relinquished from a total repugnance to going into the news papers. I have not threatened to challenge you. On the contrary I have said that I would not do so; and I say so still. At the same time the terror of your pistols is not to seal up my lips. What I believe to be true, I shall speak; and if for this I am called to account, it must even be so. I shall neither seek, nor decline, a duel with you.

Respectfully etc